

Costa Rica Will Stop Sending Cocaine to Miami

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According to an official press release from the Organization of Judicial Investigations (OIJ in Spanish), Costa Rica will no longer send cocaine or other controlled substances to the United States, at least for the time being. The announcement comes in the wake of news reports about nearly [24 tons of cocaine transported by the U.S. Air Force to Miami](#) on Saturday, July 27th 2013.

The OIJ further explained that officials in Costa Rica had spoken to the U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) about the temporary lack of an incinerator to destroy seized powder cocaine, marijuana and other illegal drugs. Prior to the massive airlift of cocaine to Miami in late July, the OIJ had managed to destroy almost 23 tons of drugs over the years at a cement factory in Cartago, but a couple of unfortunate incidents resulted in the stockpiling of confiscated drugs, and the OIJ ended up with too much coke.

A Warehouse Full of Yeyo

Before a Boeing C-17 Globemaster from the U.S. Air Force landed at the Daniel Oduber Quiros International Airport (LIR) in late July to transport pallets upon pallets of cocaine to Miami, the OIJ evidence warehouse in San Joaquin de Flores, province of Heredia, was ready to burst from all the drugs contained therein -particularly cocaine hydrochloride in powder form. The only incinerator in Costa Rica to handle the destruction of tons of drugs, routinely seized by the OIJ, Fuerza Publica (the national

police force), the Border Police, and the National Coast Guard Service is currently out of commission.

At one time, the OIJ entrusted a cement and concrete factory in Cartago to handle the destruction of seized drugs in its massive incinerators. In 2009, however, a bag holding 20 kilograms of flake was [stolen by employees of the cement factory](#) during the destruction of 4,300 kilos. The individuals responsible for the theft were caught, tried and given prison sentences between 6 and 7 years, and the OIJ stopped using that factory altogether.

By 2011, OIJ employees complained that they could not even walk around the warehouse because of all the cocaine stuffed inside. The cement factory agreed to donate an incinerator the size of a jacuzzi to the OIJ, and agents got busy destroying up to 300 kilograms per hour. By February of 2012, however, agents had [burned so much coke](#) that the incinerator began to malfunction. Fumes were escaping the incinerator's chambers and those involved in the destruction -who included judges in charge of supervision- were basically getting high, and thus the OIJ went back to stockpiling seized drugs.

The U.S. Air Force to the Rescue

The OIJ has acknowledged that storing that much cocaine in Costa Rica is an inherent risk, and thus the DEA was called in to help. This is when things start to get a bit murky. Apparently the OIJ took the matter to the Judicial Branch and the Ministry of Public Safety (MSP in Spanish); but, according to online news daily CRHoy, which broke the story, at least [two magistrates at the Judicial Branch were in the dark](#) about the U.S. Air Force arriving in Costa Rica to pick up a massive amount of cocaine.

One of the magistrates who did not know about the operation, which was shrouded in secrecy until CRHoy's Alvaro Sanchez investigated, is Carlos Chinchilla, President of the Criminal Affairs Committee of the Supreme Court in Costa Rica. Magistrate Chinchilla explained that the OIJ and DEA were supposed to file a request for a legislative permit that would grant permission for a foreign military aircraft to land in Costa Rica.

The OIJ assured CRHoy that the C-17 Globemaster was not armed and had legislative permission to enter Costa Rica's airspace, land and fly away loaded with cocaine with Miami as its ultimate destination. The problem is that no legislator recalls seeing such request or permission come through the docket at the National Assembly. When questioned about the type of aircraft, the OIJ repeated that it was "from the U.S. Air Force with a legislative permit." The Minister of Public Safety, Mario Zamora, said that he was thankful that the United States arrived to transport cocaine away from Costa Rica, but he was quick to mention that the OIJ was responsible for obtaining all permits.

Passing the Buck

Even the identification of the C-17 from the U.S. Air Force remained a mystery until recently. CRHoy [obtained a series of documents](#) related to the ongoing investigation, which apparently include a letter signed on July 10th by a U.S. Coast Guard Commander named B.J. Ripkey requesting permission for a military aircraft from the U.S. to land in Costa Rica with 12 individuals aboard. According to that letter, the aircraft would not fly directly to Miami after takeoff: it would first stop in Nicaragua and later in Honduras while carrying all that cocaine.

The letter was addressed to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the MSP and the Director of Air Surveillance -a special police unit in Costa Rica that is known for their presence at our airports. According to a 2011 Coast Guard document, there is a Commander Bradley Ripkey assigned to [DDE-COSTA RICA SEC ASST](#). Somehow his request ended up in the hands of Gerardo Masis Delgado, who is apparently in charge of Aeronautical Operations of Costa Rica's Civil Aviation Directorate. Mr. Masis issued [an interesting letter](#) that authorizes:

"aircraft type C-17 with registration 00534, or alternatively 10186, 66165, 66167, 66168, 77169, 77170, 77173, 77174, 77175, 77176, or 7717"

to enter Costa Rica's airspace and land between the 26th and 28th of July. Mr. Masis also ordered reminded that no airport costs should be assessed to any of the aircraft above. It is interesting to note that the number 77178 corresponds to the "[Spirit of Delaware](#)," which is the C-17 Globemaster III out of Dover Air Force Base pictured in

this article, and that number happens to have been underlined with an ink pen on the letter above.

What is also interesting about the above is that Civil Aviation has been admonished by the Constitutional Chamber Court (Sala Cuarta), the highest court in Costa Rica, of having [illegally approved the arrival of UH-60 Blackhawk helicopters](#) prior to President Barack Obama's historic visit to our country earlier this year. Civil Aviation seems to be the go-to guy, or maybe the fall guy, in these matters; but, many legislators in Costa Rica are not amused. The Constitution clearly requires legislative permission for foreign military forces to enter Costa Rica, and the U.S. has a history of [being snubbed in this regard](#).

So What Happened to All That Cocaine?

The [OIJ's official press release](#) assures that the controversial payload left Costa Rica on Saturday July 27th, at 2:00 in the afternoon. The C-17 presumably stopped in Nicaragua and Honduras before landing in Miami, this is in accordance to the letter signed by USCG Commander B.J. Ripkey. A judge from Costa Rica supposedly flew with all the blow and met with the Consul in Miami, who was the last link in the chain of command to certify the arrival and destruction of the drugs.

The Consulate usually answers to the Ministry of Foreign Relations, but in this case that entity has not published anything on the matter. The OIJ, however, assures that the destruction process started at 6:00 am on Monday, July 29th, and that it lasted five hours until the last bag was incinerated. The OIJ also mentioned that U.S. and Costa Rican officials were present during the process, although there are no local media reports to corroborate.

As to the matter of legislative permit for this operation, some legislators interviewed by CRHoy indicated that everything was fine as long as the military aircraft did not land with bellicose intent. The OIJ mentioned that the C-17 was not armed, but a legal expert interviewed by CRHoy mentioned:

"Do you really think that the U.S. Air Force would risk picking 24 tons of cocaine in Costa Rica and then land in Nicaragua and Honduras without some sort of armed escort or weaponry to defend the aircraft and crew?"

The Need for Legislative Permits

News about this incident have prompted debate on the requirement of legislative permits for U.S. military forces to enter Costa Rica. Many people think that such permits add a layer of bureaucracy to worthy causes such as drug interdiction. No one is questioning the value of the assistance by the U.S. Air Force and other authorities from that country in taking away a prodigious amount of drugs that our country could not destroy; the problem is one of transparency and sovereignty.

The original story by Alvaro Sanchez of CRHoy and the English language version by The Costa Rica Star were picked up by various international media outlets, and many of the comments left by readers indicate a significant level of skepticism about the operation. Allowing foreign military forces to enter a country to transport narcotics in bulk calls for a certain amount of transparency that can be achieved with legislative permits.

History has shown that nothing good happens when you the U.S. government interests transport controlled substances from Central America. When such operations take place in a shadowy manner, you end up with [Colonel Oliver North](#) of the U.S. Marine Corps, the late American pilot [Barry Seal](#) smuggling for the CIA, shady companies such as [DIASCA and Frigorificos de Puntarenas](#), and other kinds of [malfeasance](#). The people of Costa Rica have a right to know about these things; this can be accomplished with legislative permits.

The short answer as to why that U.S. Air Force C-17 should have had permission to land in Costa Rica is: Because our Constitution requires it. The rationale is simple: As a country who abolished her military more than six decades ago, Costa Rica can't afford to have foreign military or forces entering the country at their pleasure or with a permit issued by a mid-level government official. We have enough problems with [Nicaraguan Army invasions](#) and [paramilitaries entering the country](#). As a peace-loving representative democracy, Costa Rica must discuss and decide these matters at the legislative level.

- See more at: <http://news.co.cr/costa-rica-will-stop-sending-cocaine-to-miami/24277/#sthash.6CvvM1H3.dpuf>